A comparative perspective on syntactic change in the history of English

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1. In this paper we study syntactic change in the history of English through a three-way comparison of Old English (OldE), Modern English (ModE), and Modern Continental West-Germanic (Dutch, German, Frisian) (ModCWG).

2. As is well known, OldE and ModCWG share a number of syntactic properties which are absent from ModE: (i) an asymmetry between main and embedded clauses w.r.t. to the position of the finite verb; (ii) OV order in embedded clauses; (iii) nonadjacency of verb and object (in both main and embedded clauses); (iv) subject-verb inversion with all types of verbs (not just auxiliaries). A comparison with North-Germanic languages indicates that the OldE/ModCWG properties are part of common Germanic syntax, suggesting that for some reason English has moved away from the common Germanic pattern. We intend to identify this process of 'moving away' from Germanic syntax.

3. The idea is that whatever characterizes the synchronic variation between ModE and ModCWG should also characterize the diachronic development from OldE to ModE.

4. Underlying our approach is the hypothesis that Universal Grammar allows just a single parameter, to be called the 'pied piping parameter', which (accepting that movement or displacement must take place in the course of the derivation of a sentence) specifies the size (in terms of phrase structure) of the element to be displaced. This eliminates the possibility of characterizing the synchronic variation between ModE and ModCWG (and the diachronic development from OldE to ModE) in terms of parameters of phrase structure (e.g. between head-final and head-initial structure) or parameters of timing of displacements (e.g. between overt and covert object movement) having to do with the 'strength' of (features residing in) functional heads. Current analyses rely heavily on these kinds of parametrization (e.g. Pintzuk 1991, Roberts 1997). We discuss their tenability, as well as that of another approach which we reject, that capitalizes on the idea that auxiliaries in ModE are more grammaticalized in comparison with auxiliaries in OldE and ModCWG (Lightfoot 1979).

5. On the face of it, it seems unquestionable that English in the course of its development (unlike CWG) lost the possibility of displacing the object out of the VP (object shift). But this leaves open the question of how to characterize (let alone explain) the process of 'losing object shift'. We intend to do just that, using the pied piping parameter, and based on a comparison of the relevant properties of ModE and ModCWG.

6. As discussed in Koster (2000) and touched upon in Cinque (1999), ModE has the curious property that certain (low) adverbs and adverbial NPs and PPs must be placed after the VP (1). In CWG, those same elements (when not backgrounded) appear to the left of the base position of the verb (i.e. the position of the nonfinite verb or the verb in embedded clauses)(2).

(1) a. John did it fast   b. John read the book yesterday

(2) a. ..dat   Jan   het   (snel)   deed   (*snel)   (CWG, Dutch)
         that   John   it   fast   did   fast

    b. ..dat   Jan   het boek   (gisteren)   las   (*gisteren)
         that   John   the book   yesterday   read-PAST   yesterday

Assuming with Cinque (1999) that adverbs are specifiers of VP-external functional projections, it follows that in ModE the elements of the VP (the verb and its object) have been displaced out of the VP. The fact that the verb and its object are necessarily adjacent then suggests that the entire VP was moved in (1). In Dutch, on the other hand, it seems that only the object has been moved out of the VP. In terms of the pied piping parameter, this suggests that *where CWG moves objects, English moves the entire VP.* The (apparent) loss of object shift has now

been explained: assuming that object shift must take place (for reasons that do not concern us here), we say that OldE and CWG choose to move just the object, whereas ModE chooses to move the entire VP.

7. The four main syntactic differences between ModE on the one hand and OldE and ModCWG on the other hand (see 2. above) follow automatically from our hypothesis. (i) There is an asymmetry between main and embedded clauses in OldE/ModCWG w.r.t. the position of the verb but not w.r.t. the position of the object. If in ModE the verb moves along with the object, we no longer expect a main/embedded clause asymmetry w.r.t. the position of the verb. (ii) If the OV word order in OldE/CWG is the result of object shift, and ModE moves the VP instead of the object, we expect no OV word order in ModE. (iii) If nonadjacency of the verb and the object is the result of object shift out of the VP, and ModE moves the entire VP, we expect the verb and the object to remain adjacent in ModE. (iv) If in ModE only auxiliaries are generated in functional positions outside the VP (we argue, on the basis of Warner 1990, Denison 1993, IJbema 2002, that this is the case in OldE and ModCWG as well), we expect only auxiliaries to be free to undergo subject-verb inversion; other verbs are moved together with the object to some specifier position in the functional domain and are not expected to be able to move out of that specifier position by standard locality conditions on head movement. In OldE and ModCWG, verbs are not stuck inside the VP in some specifier position, and are free to undergo the head movement that yields subject-verb inversion.

8. The following developments in the history of English syntax can also be (directly or indirectly) ascribed to the shift from individual object movement to collective VP-movement: (i) the stabilization of the order indirect object-direct object in the VP of a ditransitive verb (the more varied picture of OldE involving object shift); (ii) the emergence of the pattern verb-object-particle with particle verbs (the more complex pattern verb-particle-object is analyzed as a descendant of an OldE pattern involving heavy NP shift); (iii) the disappearance of transitive expletive constructions; (iv) the replacement of reflexive pronouns by zero reflexives; (v) [ultimately] the disappearance of perfective *be* with unaccusative verbs.

9. The paper raises the question whether the shift from individual to collective movement could be contact induced. The finding of Kroch and Taylor (1994) that the VO order started with pronouns in the North is suggestive of Norse influence, as well as the fact that the Middle English London standard was heavily colored by northern dialect features. We notice that creole languages display a number of properties suggesting collective VP-movement: (i) VO-order, (ii) V-O adjacency, (iii) absence of clitics or weak pronoun shift, (iv) use of tense/mood/aspect auxiliaries to express functional categories and absence of verb movement, (v) absence of true reflexives. Accepting Thomason and Kaufman's scenario of creolization as the result of substratum influence, these findings suggest that contact induced syntactic change invariably involves a shift from individual to collective movement.

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